

 **Article REVIEW**

**Robert McMahon.** “U.S. Policy toward South Asia and Tibet during the Early Cold War”. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:3 (Summer 2006): 131-144. doi: 10.1162/jcws.2006.8.3.131. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2006.8.3.131> .

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**P**rofessor Robert McMahon’s article considers U.S. policy toward India and Pakistan through the early 1960s as well as the interplay with developments in Tibet during this period, especially the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959 and the 1962 India-China border war. Although one can differ from McMahon’s conclusion that these events were “a key turning point” in the Cold War, they clearly had important and long-lasting consequences for South Asia far beyond the period McMahon writes about: the deterioration of Sino-Indian relations, the building of close Sino-Pakistan ties and, in the late 1960s, the brief but sharp decline in U.S.-Pakistan relations. It is important to note that American actions regarding Tibet—particularly the CIA’s clandestine support for anti-Chinese Tibetan and Khampa insurgents—were not sparked by South Asia policy considerations, but by the U.S. desire to cause trouble for its then enemy China. Washington’s policy toward India and Pakistan had its own trajectory that followed a different and separate path from that of U.S.-China policy.

Turning back to the late 1940s, as McMahon writes, the United States regarded newly independent India and Pakistan as countries of marginal interest. The Korean War caused Washington to take a bleaker view of the communist threat and to adopt a more vigorous containment policy. Although the Truman administration flirted with the idea of some sort of Middle East defense pact involving Pakistan, in the end it decided against this and rebuffed Pakistan’s frequent entreaties for military assistance. The administration did not wish to entangle the United States in the bitter dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles were prepared to run this risk. As part of their policy of strengthening security arrangements along the borders of the Soviet Union, Washington embraced Pakistan as a military ally in February 1954. The Eisenhower administration, according to the *New York Times*, had concluded, “The importance of bringing Pakistan in on the defense of the Middle East is more important than pleasant relations with Mr. Nehru.”<sup>1</sup> Providing Pakistan military aid and making

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Andrews Schmidt, “Pakistan to Get Arms,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1954. Dulles, who was personally annoyed by Nehru’s refusal to sign the 1950 peace treaty with Japan, considered the Indian leader “an utterly impractical, statesman.”

India's enemy a U.S. security partner, as McMahon stresses, deeply angered Nehru and set the stage for estranged U.S.-India relations for the rest of the Cold War. The U.S.-Pakistan alliance also moved India closer to the Soviet Union and, in the mid-1950s, helped spur the short-lived Hindi-Chini Bahai Bahai honeymoon between Delhi and Beijing.

Three years later, Eisenhower's second inaugural address signaled a policy shift from security to economic assistance, expressing the president's concern that communism would tempt the newly emerging nations of the Third World unless enhanced economic development enabled them to escape "from grinding poverty."<sup>2</sup> Bilateral economic assistance to India grew substantially and, at Washington's urging, the World Bank organized its first ever aid consortium in order to boost international assistance to India. Despite Pakistan's annoyance over increased U.S. aid to India, Eisenhower largely succeeded in achieving a main goal of U.S. South Asia policy: maintaining good relations with both India and Pakistan. He was, however, unsuccessful in efforts to achieve another policy goal: a settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

While all this was happening, the Sino-Indian honeymoon soured, coming to grief over the failure of diplomacy to resolve the problem of disputed borders in the Himalayas<sup>3</sup> as well as the consequences of the flight of the Dalai Lama and thousands of his supporters to India in 1959. Some in Washington saw frayed Delhi-Beijing relations as the basis for making India a strategic counterweight against China. President Eisenhower, however, disagreed. "We could not talk of a counterweight if the nation in question refuses to be a counterweight," he told NSC colleagues in May 1959. A likely element in China's annoyance at India was the covert arms help that the CIA was providing anti-Chinese Khampa and Tibetan insurgents. Given the facts of geography, Beijing presumably thought that India was at the very least acquiescing in CIA's activities.

President John F. Kennedy favored closer U.S.-India relations even more than Eisenhower and was less concerned about Pakistan's reaction. The Sino-Indian frontier clash over the disputed Himalayan borders in October 1962 provided an opportunity that the administration quickly seized. When the Red army routed ill-equipped Indian troops and even advanced down to the plains of Assam, the United States rushed military assistance to India, an action that infuriated Pakistan. Before Kennedy could respond to a plea for

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<sup>2</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years, Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), 109-110.

<sup>3</sup> The dispute concerned both areas in both western and eastern parts of the Himalayas. In the east, while China claimed some 40,000 square miles of northeastern India, the real problem concerned its refusal to accept the so-called McMahon line proposed in the 1914 Simla conference as the border. At the time, the Chinese representative had refused to sign the agreement, a position the Nationalist and Communists regime maintained. In the west, the two countries disputed ownership of the Aksai Chin, a vast, uninhabited high desert between Kashmir and Tibet.

direct U.S. Air Force support from Nehru,<sup>4</sup> the Chinese adroitly announced a unilateral cease-fire and withdrew their forces back to their version of the frontier. They had made their point.

Believing that the Himalayan crisis perhaps offered an opportunity to resolve the Kashmir dispute, Washington (and London) successfully pressed Pakistan and India into negotiations. Although six rounds of the talks failed to budge either country from their basic, and conflicting, positions, McMahon is unfair to criticize the Kennedy administration for trying. As Phillips Talbot, then the regional assistant secretary of state argued, failure to do so would probably ensure—as it has—that the Kashmir dispute would continue to present a chronic threat to peace.<sup>5</sup>

It was the end of Sino-Indian hostilities after the cease-fire, not the failed Kashmir negotiations, which enabled Nehru to reassert India's policy of nonalignment and to move away from the brief embrace of the United States. The war, nonetheless, altered India's strategic outlook. China now vied with Pakistan as the major security threat and India still sought U.S. military help. Lyndon Johnson, who was less taken with India than Kennedy, refused to supply New Delhi F-104s in May 1964 even though the United States had provided the supersonic aircraft to Pakistan. This gave the Soviet Union the opening to step in with MiGs and to begin its large-scale arms supply program with India.

In the meanwhile, bitter about its ally's military help to "enemy" India, Pakistan set about forging closer ties with China despite sharp cautions from Kennedy and Johnson. Angered by the Beijing-Islamabad rapprochement, Johnson held up economic assistance to Pakistan in June 1965. Three months later, when India and Pakistan went to war over Kashmir, he cut off military and economic assistance to both countries. By then, frustrated by a decade of failed efforts to reduce India-Pakistan tensions, U.S. officials concluded that India and Pakistan were far more worried about each other than any Soviet threat. Turning U.S. South Asia policy on its head, Secretary of State Dean Rusk even welcomed the Soviet effort to broker a peace settlement at Tashkent. "If the Russians failed at Tashkent, Rush declared, "at least the Russians would have the experience of some of the frustrations that we have had for twenty years in trying to sort out things between India and Pakistan."<sup>6</sup>

For the rest of the Cold War and beyond the period McMahon discusses, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship alternately warmed and cooled while U.S.-India relations remained estranged. India continued to depend primarily on the Soviet Union for military supplies.

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<sup>4</sup> State Department telegram to Embassy New Delhi, November 19, 1962, conveying the text of the letter from Nehru to Kennedy.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000*, (Washington, 2001), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Dean Rusk Oral History, 36, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

China became Pakistan's security lifebelt. A hesitant process of détente between Beijing and New Delhi began in the 1980s and relations have improved. Nonetheless, India publicly cited the threat from China as a reason for its 1998 nuclear tests and, in 2006, the Chinese ambassador to India reiterated Beijing's claim to a large swath of northeastern India. The dispute that led to the 1962 border war remains unresolved. Indeed, common concerns about a rising China have provided a strategic rationale for enhanced security cooperation between Washington and New Delhi. This time, cooperative U.S.-India ties could well prove more durable than the brief coming together more than four decades ago as a consequence of 1962 frontier conflict.

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